

## **"Rough, Rude and Coarse Men": Australians in the Imperial Camel Corps**

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“The sands of the Sinai, the jebels of Judea, and the mountains of Moab have all echoed to the march of the Imperial Camel Brigade”.<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of the Commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, General Edmund Allenby, written to the Commander of the Imperial Camel Corps (ICC), General Clement Leslie Smith upon the disbanding of the brigade in late 1918. In recounting this quote almost two decades later, one of the brigade’s staff captains, W.T. Bichan, believed that it would have been more accurate to say rather, that they have all echoed “to the shuffling of the Brigade”.<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines the Australian experience of the ICC in the Sinai–Palestine Campaign of the First World War. The experience of the Australian troopers of the corps forms an unusual and widely unknown aspect of the history of the Allied Middle Eastern campaign. As mounted infantrymen, they participated in significant battles in the Sinai, Palestine and the Jordan Valley while inspiring a reputation for coarse behaviour and coarser men. This narrative has remained historically dominant due to a general lack of wider scholarship surrounding the cameleers and a historical literature that has been predominantly defined by the cameleers themselves. Following the corps from its foundation in the Western Desert in Egypt in 1916 through to its disbanding in 1918 and its place in the historical landscape post-war, this paper draws on a combination of personal experiences and operational history to present an overview of the Australian experience of the Imperial Camel Corps in the Sinai–Palestine campaign of the First World War.

The ICC was formed in January 1916 to join the Western Frontier Force fighting the Senussi people of the Libyan Desert on the border with Egypt as part of the broader campaign against the Ottoman Empire. The Senussi tribespeople began agitating in 1915 against British rule in Egypt, encouraged by the Ottomans, which forced the British to allocate a portion of their forces away from the main fronts and into the desert.<sup>3</sup> However, by the time the cameleers arrived in March 1916, there was very little fighting left to be done against the Senussi and so their skills were utilised to patrol the desert.<sup>4</sup> It was conditions like these that the Camel Corps was designed for. Horses had been the traditional British war mounts prior to the siege of Khartoum in 1884, in which camels were first used to transport British soldiers.<sup>5</sup> It was not until 1907 that a British Camel Company was officially formed in Khartoum. This company lay the foundation for the corps that would be utilised in the First World War.

In 1909 the Mounted Infantry School in Cairo discontinued the use of horses in favour of camels as the horses proved unsuitable in the sandy and arid climate, needing watering far too frequently to meet operational demands.<sup>6</sup> The use of camels in Sudan had not transformed the British cavalry forces as the majority of their conflicts still remained in Europe or regions

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<sup>1</sup> W. T. Bichan to G. F. Langley, November 5, 1934, AWM PR00096.

<sup>2</sup> Bichan to Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>3</sup> H. S. Gullett, *The Official History of Australia in the First World War: Vol VII The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine, 1914-1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1941), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Reid, *The Fighting Cameliers* (Sydney: Halstead Printing Co., 1934), 16, AWM013068 R940.48194.

<sup>5</sup> J. Barber to G. F. Langley, July 18, 1934, AWM PR00096.

<sup>6</sup> Barber to Langley, AWM PR00096.

where the use of horses was still preferable. When the First World War broke out, the British deployed the horses they possessed despite knowing they would not be the ideal cavalry mount. It would take time to reconstitute their already limited camel-mounted personnel into anything resembling a fighting force. When the Ottoman forces retreated from the Suez into the Sinai in late 1915, personnel who had staffed the Khartoum Camel Corps and run the Mounted Infantry School in Cairo were corralled and assigned to train the very first battalion of Australian infantrymen of the Imperial Camel Corps. The very first camels were initially sourced from the Egyptian army and coastguard before being purchased privately from across Egypt and Sudan.<sup>7</sup> They made for more effective mounts in Egypt: they could go five days without a drink and could carry a much-increased quantity of rations and equipment. This enabled the ICC to conduct five-day-long patrols and cover a far greater area of land than would be possible on horseback.<sup>8</sup>

Initially made up of four companies of mounted infantrymen, the cameleers were soldiers who had volunteered or been selected by their previous unit commanders for transfer. They were supplied from across the Australian Infantry Brigades and the Light Horse Regiments which had been evacuated from Gallipoli in December 1915. These supposedly troublesome transferred soldiers were trained in Abbassia and Tel-el-Kebir outside of Cairo for service in the newly-formed ICC. According to Major Oliver Hogue (typically known under his pen-name of Trooper Bluegum), the “young adaptable Australians took to camels like ducks to water”.<sup>9</sup> Captain J. Barber, as an old Khartoum Camel Corps Officer, took charge of much of the training at Tel-el-Kebir and described the Australian soldiers as getting “on to the work in good style and a sound [and] efficient Camel Corps soon came into the limelight”.<sup>10</sup>

From the time the initial four Australian companies were formed, the narrative began that officers from outside the ICC took this as an opportunity to discard the riff-raff of their own battalions. However, this was not the case. Many of the early cameleers were volunteers who could boast general experience with animals or stock. Private Elias Lebovitz of the 128th Battalion volunteered on account of his upbringing in Western Australia and two years’ experience handling livestock, as well as his ability to speak Arabic.<sup>11</sup> When Lance Corporal Bendyshe of the 26th Battalion applied for transfer to the ICC on account of his pre-war experience with camels in Western Australia, his commanding officer recommended his application, stating that “this is an exceptionally good and reliable man”.<sup>12</sup> Lebovitz and Bendyshe were among a number of highly trained and experienced soldiers who volunteered for the Camel Corps on account of their experience and were accepted for transfer on the basis of a commendation.

While these recruits challenge the dominant perception of the Camel Corps’ formation, the corps did receive its share of unsavoury transfers in its infancy. On 2 February 1916, the Commandant of the Camel Corps informed the commanding officer of the 4th Brigade that

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<sup>7</sup> Barber to Langley, AWM PR00096; As the war progressed, the camels began being sourced in India, known as Bikaner camels. The Indian Army had its own Camel Corps known as the Bikaner Camel Corps which has existed in some capacity for hundreds of years. The Bikaner Camel Corps was dissolved in early 1916 when the Imperial Camel Corps was in its infancy.

<sup>8</sup> “The employment of Camel Corps,” Jan 11, 1918, AWM25 157/2/2.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Hogue, *The Cameliars* (London: A. Melrose, 1919), 4, AWM002858 A823.2.

<sup>10</sup> Barber to Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>11</sup> “128<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF: Volunteers for Camel Corps,” Jan, 1916, AWM25 157/2.

<sup>12</sup> C/O 26 Battallion to O/C AU. GS, Jan 15, 1916, AWM25 157/2.

three men, Privates O'Shea, Ottaway, and Murdoch, were being returned to their original units for "disciplinary reasons" less than a month after they arrived.<sup>13</sup> The circumstances of their "misconduct" were not provided, and replacements were requested on 4 February to replenish the unit's numbers.<sup>14</sup>

Those transfers that managed to avoid disciplinary action were deployed primarily as patrolling units in the desert around Sollum, along the Egypt–Libya border. Unit diaries for No.2 Coy ICC paint a monotonous picture of this time for the corps, with patrol reports often noting topographical findings and locations of wells for water, or the occasional interaction with the native Bedouin population.<sup>15</sup> Distinct from the Senussi, this nomadic Arab population were allied with the Ottoman Empire and caused minor trouble for the British Forces in Egypt. The defining phrase of this early period was perfectly articulated by Private Charles Banwell Dodd in his diaries: "nothing to report".<sup>16</sup> Private Frank Reid described in his 1934 book, *The Fighting Cameliers*, that the desert patrolling was "dreary work, and soon we were longing for something more active".<sup>17</sup>

The British cavalry had been reassigned in the defence of the Suez Canal while the ICC monitored the mostly defeated Senussi. However, with the bulk of infantry headed for the battlefields of France, the men of the Camel Corps were keenly aware of the perceived significance, or insignificance, of their war contribution. Captain George F. Langley wrote in a letter home in May 1916 that "when we saw the battalions on the move for France, we felt just a little down-hearted".<sup>18</sup> Despite this, Langley assigned great responsibility to the work of the ICC against the Senussi describing it as "very important to the welfare and quiet of Egypt ... so we are doing something".<sup>19</sup> Langley's rank as an officer may have influenced his perspective on this crisis of conscience and his ability to appreciate the important, if dull, work of the early ICC.

Some soldiers reacted to this feeling of boredom in more radical ways. In June 1916, 15 Australian soldiers were returned to the training battalions in Tel-El-Kebir as being "undesirables".<sup>20</sup> The missive stated that "their object apparently has been to misbehave themselves in such a way as to get removed from the Corps and thus be sent to France".<sup>21</sup> This willingness to act out in the hopes of being sent to the Western Front explains some of the early misbehaviour of certain members of the supposedly troublesome Camel Corps. In other cases, as was the reality across the AIF, some soldiers simply misbehaved. Others instead felt a longing for the life of the Light Horseman and all the attached romance and heraldry. A poem written by Major Oliver Hogue under his penname, Trooper Bluegum, *The Camelier's Lament*, bemoaned that, "On the desert we're "Camels"; we're rough, rude and coarse men, but when up on leave, we're once more Light Horsemen with feathers and leggings and spurs".<sup>22</sup> The monotony of an early cameleers' life was a far cry from the imagined action of the Light Horse.

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<sup>13</sup> Commandant Camel Corps to O/C 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade AIF, February 2, 1916, AWM25 157/3.

<sup>14</sup> Commandant Camel Corps to O/C 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade AIF, 1916, AWM25 157/3.

<sup>15</sup> O/C Moghara Force to I.C.C. Headquarters Abbassia, November 5, 1916, AWM25 157/11.

<sup>16</sup> Diaries of Charles Banwell Dodd, October 17, 1916, AWM PR90/165.

<sup>17</sup> Reid, *The Fighting Cameliers*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> G.F. Langley, Letter home to family, May 29, 1916, AWM PR00096.

<sup>19</sup> Langley, Letter home to family, AWM PR00096.

<sup>20</sup> C/O Imperial Camel Corps to O/C Training Battalions Tel-el-Kebir, June 23, 1916, AWM25 157/12.

<sup>21</sup> C/O ICC to O/C Training Battalions, AWM25 157/12.

<sup>22</sup> Hogue, *The Cameleers*, 2.

Midway through 1916, then commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, Archibald Murray, decided to expand the ICC and specifically requested more Australian troops fill the ranks. In a missive to the General Officer Commanding of the Anzac Mounted Division in June 1916, it was stated, “In in the view of the excellent material for camelry which the Anzac Mounted Division has already proven itself to possess, the Commander-in-Chief is anxious that these additional companies should, if possible, be drawn from the same source.”<sup>23</sup> This might seem at odds with the reputation the cameleers had created for themselves but is clear recognition of the skill these supposedly rough Australian soldiers so clearly possessed.

However, the Anzac Mounted Division did not have the numbers to supply two full battalions, and when the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade was formed on 19 December 1916, it comprised only three battalions: a 1st Australian Battalion, a 2nd British Battalion and a 3rd Australian and New Zealand Battalion, which would later become a solely Australian battalion. This brought the corps’ strength up to 15 companies, with a further four companies from Abbassia forming the 4th Australian and New Zealand Battalion in May 1917. At full strength, the brigade boasted approximately 4150 men and 4,800 camels.<sup>24</sup>

During 1916, reinforcements for the ICCB were recruited from the Light Horsemen training in Australia. These soldiers were based at Menangle Park in NSW but had to be transported in batches to Sydney for training on the camels at Sydney Zoo. In June 1916, the “Camel King” Abdul Wade lent the army six camels for training purposes at Menangle Park.<sup>25</sup> This gift enabled the sufficient training of Camel Corps reinforcements so that they could be immediately deployed to replenish the four battalions once arrived in Egypt.

The brigade also included the Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery, colloquially referred to by the ICCB as the “Bing Boys”.<sup>26</sup> The ICCB was often referred to as a truly imperial brigade as it drew strength from right across the British Empire. This created something of a melting pot of identities: men from across Britain and the Australasian dominions – including 13 Indigenous Australians – served alongside Muslim and Sikh men from the battery. Australian soldiers in the ICCB always made up the majority of troops in the corps, making it a truly unique brigade within the ranks of the British Forces, as all other Imperial fighting units were predominantly made up of British soldiers.

Some of the first major fighting experienced by the ICC was during the Battle of Romani in August 1916. In the process of clearing the Sinai Peninsula of Ottoman forces, the Allies advanced on the town of El Arish on 21 December 1916 only to find the Ottomans had retreated and fortified themselves at a fortified garrison named Magdhaba, 20 miles inland.<sup>27</sup> This marked the first battle on 23 December 1916 in which the brigade saw action, just four days after its official formation. After a brutal night march, the ICCB attached to the Anzac

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<sup>23</sup> Major General Sir Arthur Lynden Bell to G. O/C Anzac Mounted Division, June 9, 1916, AWM25 157/5.

<sup>24</sup> “The Camel Company 1916-1918,” New Zealand History, September 2, 2014, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/camel-corps/organisation>.

<sup>25</sup> Abdul Wade gained the title of “Camel King” due to his status as a wealthy camel merchant in Western Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The camels and ‘Afghan’ (oftentimes Indian) workers he brought to Australia for his business were a catalyst for the eventual establishment of dozens of mosques throughout rural Western and South Australia; Reid, *The Fighting Cameliars*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Bichan to Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>27</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 214.

Mounted Division were ordered by Major General Sir Harry Chauvel to begin what needed to be a swift and decisive assault.

As mounted infantry, their role in combat differed from what the previous infantry and cavalry soldiers had experienced as they were required to dismount at a distance from the objective and continue on foot.<sup>28</sup> In the Light Horse, when soldiers dismounted to advance, one in four troopers was required to remain behind and the four horses but camels proved the more pliable mount in combat. One trooper could manage up to 12 camels once they had been barracked (crouched/kneeling) which allowed for a far greater proportion of cameleers to take part in the fighting.<sup>29</sup> As an infantry unit, they were best utilised as an attachment to a mounted unit to allow for greater “freedom of action” for their mounted comrades.<sup>30</sup>

This tactic was employed to great success at Magdhaba. The cameleers of the 1st and 3rd Battalions dismounted and advanced directly on the Ottoman-held town in conjunction with the 3rd Light Horse Regiment, swiftly capturing their objective. This advance was across open ground toward the No. 2 Redoubt with little cover and while the cameleers began to draw fire, casualties remained low.<sup>31</sup> Superb artillery fire from the Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery hindered the capabilities of the Ottoman riflemen in the redoubt.<sup>32</sup> This enabled the cameleers to capture the redoubt. It was their success that turned the tide of the battle, convincing Chauvel to withdraw orders to retreat. Gullet in the Official History wrote that “the significance of the achievement of ... the Camels was immediately demonstrated” upon the gaining of their objective.<sup>33</sup>

Advancing to No.1 Redoubt, the Australians forced the surrender of the enemy within, and soon after the 3rd Redoubt fell, signalling victory for the Anzac Mounted Division. When recalling the battle, Staff Captain J.R. Hall declared that despite this being the first time many of the cameleers had been in action, “these companies acquitted themselves remarkably well”.<sup>34</sup> Having marched back to El Arish, the Brigade was inspected by Chauvel, and Generals Chetwode and Dobell of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, and according to the ICCB HQ unit diaries, were “complimented it on its success at Magdhaba”.<sup>35</sup> In their first combat as a brigade, the cameleers had, according to the New South Wales paper, *Tweed Daily*, on 1 January 1917, “proved the sterling value of the camel corps”.<sup>36</sup>

While the ICCB was involved in many engagements in the clearing of the Sinai Peninsula, Magdhaba was the most significant in boosting the notoriety of the brigade. Publication of their battle honours in Australian newspapers and acknowledgment by the British war correspondent William Massey was garnering attention to the work of the ICCB.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “The employment of Camel Corps,” AWM25 157/2/2.

<sup>29</sup> “Cameliers and Camels at War,” New Zealand History, September 2, 2014, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/camel-corps/organisation>.

<sup>30</sup> “The employment of Camel Corps,” AWM25 157/2/2.

<sup>31</sup> J Hall to G.F. Langley, “A short history of the ICC,” 1934, AWM224 MSS42.

<sup>32</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42.

<sup>33</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 222.

<sup>34</sup> Bichan to Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>35</sup> “Australian Imperial Force Unit War Diaries, 1914-18 War, Camel Corps,” December 28, 1916, AWM4 11/2/1.

<sup>36</sup> “Anzacs Victorious March: The Importance of Magdhaba,” *Tweed Daily*, January 1, 1917, 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article195836070>.

<sup>37</sup> “Anzacs Victorious March,” 3.

However, Australian soldiers of the ICCB wished for greater recognition of their achievements. In a letter home on 17 January 1917, Hogue complained about the English newspapers highlighting the great work of the corps without acknowledging that “the pick of them and over half of them are Australians and they have done excellently”.<sup>38</sup> He put this down to the fact that “it is an English General who commands the ICC and he gets the glory”.<sup>39</sup> However, Hogue also pointed the finger at the AIF, as the brigade’s perceived invisibility existed within its own forces. He wrote of comfort packages not being delivered to the soldiers in the early days of the corps but rather to their parent regiments.<sup>40</sup>

The lack of publicity experienced by the ICCB can be better viewed as a microcosm of the experience of many Australians serving in the Middle East during the war. The lack of an Australian war correspondent in the Egypt in 1916 led to assumptions from home that their sons in the desert were having “a better go of it” than in France and should be considered lucky to be there.<sup>41</sup> This is not an experience unique to the ICCB but there was perhaps a perceived heightening of it due to their widely unknown existence among the public and members of the AIF.

When the brigade was not fighting or patrolling, it was taking care of nearly 5,000 camels. Management of animals was incredibly important to the brigade’s ability to operate. They required regular grooming and mange dressing for itchy skin as well as tick removal and treatment for wounds sustained in combat or from heavy loads. Camel itch was an ever-present maintenance issue for the troopers and made for an extremely unpleasant experience. Frank Reid described “nights when we scarcely close our eyes – just lay and scratched”.<sup>42</sup>

An individual camel’s temperament was perhaps the defining factor in a cameleer’s experience with the brigade. Some were known to be aggressive or *majnoon*, an Arabic word for crazy.<sup>43</sup> In a more extreme case, Reid and Hogue recorded an instance when a camel “went wild” and chased every man in sight after the capture of Magdhaba, before targeting a medical officer to such a point where onlookers contemplated shooting the animal before it became distracted.<sup>44</sup> Reid also told of a New Zealand soldier whose arm was so badly bitten in a camel attack that it had to be amputated, before the man died of his wounds.<sup>45</sup>

For most cameleers, their mounts were more prone to disobedience than maiming. It was not unusual for a camel to object to a march by barracking and refusing to move. This eccentric behaviour was a regular occurrence for the brigade and was well-known amongst the troopers. Writing for the corp’s newsletter in July 1917, Reid described the camel as a “humpy-backed, splayed footed, knock-kneed, long-necked, unwieldy creature that is calculated to act detrimentally towards that close feeling of intimacy which might be desired between a camel and his rider”.<sup>46</sup> Even when an individual cameleer’s steed was even-tempered, they were a far

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Oliver Hogue to his brother, Egypt, January 17, 1917, 6, AWM RCDIG0000997.

<sup>39</sup> Oliver Hogue to his brother, 6, AWM RCDIG0000997.

<sup>40</sup> Hogue, *The Cameleers*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Hogue, *The Cameleers*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Reid, *The Fighting Cameliars*, 148.

<sup>43</sup> Hogue, *The Cameleers*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Hogue, *The Cameleers*, 73-73; Reid, *The Fighting Cameliars*, 56.

<sup>45</sup> Reid, *The Fighting Cameliars*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Frank Reid, “My Camel & Others,” *Barrak*, July 1, 1917, AWM PR00096.

cry from their horses left behind by some of the Light Horse transfers and there were substantial currents of negative feeling toward their mounts recorded in 1916 and 1917.

In early 1917, the ICCB continued northward with the Anzac Mounted Division's push into Palestine. It participated in the capture of Rafa in January and the raid on Bir El-Hassana in February where, together with the men of the Mountain Battery, it forced the surrender of the Ottoman outpost.<sup>47</sup> The brigade also took part in the unsuccessful First Battle of Gaza in March 1917, and occupied the Gaza–Beersheba Road to block Ottoman reinforcements coming into Gaza. During the blockade, the brigade saw little fierce fighting and suffered minimal casualties before being withdrawn to Deir el Belah the next day.<sup>48</sup> The allied forces regrouped and on 17 April 1917 began their second assault on Gaza, in which the ICCB took on a far greater and more costly role.

With the 2nd British Battalion in reserve, the brigade was represented entirely by Anzac troops whose status as mounted infantry meant dismounting from camels and advancing on foot at a distance of 4,000 yards from enemy lines. Casualties were minimal during the initial approach, but once they came within artillery range, they came under considerable fire. Their objective was a hill later dubbed the “Tank Redoubt” after the British tank nicknamed “Nuttie” that led the cameleers across the field.<sup>49</sup> As the tank moved ahead of the advancing Australians, the 1st Battalion naturally trailed behind the machine as it pushed forward. Rather than providing cover for the men behind it, Captain Bichan recalled that the tank “drew artillery fire all the way and any troops bunched near it were slaughtered right away”.<sup>50</sup>

As the tank continued its approach, the cameleers were still too far from the enemy to return fire and their casualties were increasing rapidly. Reaching the Tank Redoubt, its proximity to the Ottoman lines further intensified the fire and eventually several well placed shells sent it up in flames. Fighting on despite extreme casualty levels, the Australian cameleers succeeded in taking their objective followed closely behind by 20 British infantrymen of the 7th Essex Regiment.<sup>51</sup> It was the only allied unit to achieve its objective in the entire engagement. This position was held at heavy loss to the cameleers for several hours under intense machine-gun fire and shelling. With no success at any other part of the line, the few surviving cameleers were forced to evacuate the redoubt as vastly superior Ottoman numbers advanced on their position.

To their right, the 3rd Battalion advanced well and together with a squadron of the 11th Light Horse Regiment, achieved the most extreme point reached by the British forces in the battle.<sup>52</sup> According to the unit diaries of the 3rd Battalion, the account of its success was not believed. It was only well “after the operations in November 1917 [that] this area was inspected by Brigadier General Smith V.C., together with Lieutenant-Colonel Forth, and three of the 3rd Battalion's unburied dead were found”.<sup>53</sup> By dusk on 17 November, surviving ICCB troops

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<sup>47</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42.

<sup>48</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42; Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 270-71.

<sup>49</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42.

<sup>50</sup> Bichan to Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>51</sup> Bichan to Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>52</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 316.

<sup>53</sup> “Australian Imperial Force Unit War Diaries, 1914-18 War, Camel Corps, 3<sup>rd</sup> ANZAC Battalion, April-May 1917,” April 18, 1917, AWM4 11/8/4.

were withdrawn from the battle having suffered 345 casualties and 176 camel casualties.<sup>54</sup> Bichan described it as “a heart-breaking day” but simultaneously commended the brigade for the “wonderful courage and bravery [that] had been displayed during the advance”.<sup>55</sup> The Second Battle of Gaza represented the heaviest loss of the ICCB’s campaign but its courage in the face of such devastating odds esteemed the brigade and its members.

After two defeats at Gaza, morale was at an all-time low across the entire Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF). It was during this period that the cameleers began publishing newsletters of the Imperial Camel Corps and its field ambulance in 1917, *Barrak* and *Cacolet*. The first edition of *Barrak* was published on 1 July 1917 and included a variety of poems, short stories, humorous advertisements and dictionaries for military terminology. These newsletters adopted the distinctly humorous Anzac tone and undoubtedly brought much enjoyment to their thousands of readers in Egypt and home in Australia, asking profound questions such as, “What is the difference between ‘Leave, dental’ and ‘Leave, absent without?’”.<sup>56</sup> In *Barrak*’s first issue, Reid placed a for sale ad for a “modern steam camel” which he claimed boasted a “pneumatic hump” and an “adjustable bladder”.<sup>57</sup> *Barrak* reported local brigade news as well as sales numbers for the journals. The newsletter’s first edition reportedly ran over 3,000 copies with the second publishing on 1 September 1917 running over 4,000 copies.<sup>58</sup>

*Cacolet* was the newsletter of the Australian Camel Field Ambulance. Its title refers to the stretcher contraptions that were strapped to either side of a camel in order to carry wounded from the field. According to Reid, the seesaw mechanic of a cacolet meant that, should the weights of its two passengers be starkly different, the lighter man would be thrown around. For a wounded passenger, Reid describes that “the motion over a long distance was the very refinement of torture”.<sup>59</sup> In the Official History, Gullet wrote, “It would be scarcely possible to devise a more acute torture for a man with mutilated limbs than this hideous form of ambulance transport”.<sup>60</sup> So torturous was a ride in a cacolet, that in February 1917 at the raid on Bir-el-Hassana, Lance Corporal MacGregor of the 2nd Battalion whose ankle was shattered by a bullet, was the recipient of the first ever aeromedical evacuation. Requiring urgent treatment in a hospital, Macgregor was flown to the nearest hospital in El-Arish on a 45-minute flight, sparing him from what would have been a mortally perilous three-day transport.<sup>61</sup> Despite its reviled namesake, the *Cacolet* journal provided similar entertainment for its readers while educating those readers on the activities – or escapades – of the ICCB.

A regular instalment in the newsletters was the brigade sports news. The corps put together semi-regular sports programmes as entertainment and a morale-boost for the troops. The first edition of *Barrak* reported a two-day event presided over by the officers, who judged competitors in events like the camel scurry, camel wrestling, tug of war, and musical chairs on

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<sup>54</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42.

<sup>55</sup> Bichan to Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>56</sup> “Please Report,” *Barrak*, September 1, 1917, AWM PR00096.

<sup>57</sup> “Our Little Ads,” *Barrak*, July 1, 1917, AWM PR00096.

<sup>58</sup> “Editorial,” *Barrak*, September 1, 1917, AWM PR00096; “Editorial,” *Barrak*, November 1, 1917, AWM PR00096.

<sup>59</sup> Reid, *The Fighting Cameliers*, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 577.

<sup>61</sup> Eran Dolev, “The first recorded aeromedical evacuation in the British Army,” *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps* 132, no. 1 (February 1986): 34-36, <https://doi.org/10.1136/jramc-132-01-08>.



camels.<sup>62</sup> The Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery participated in their own separate camel wrestling event, which by Langley's account was "very spectacular and funny and served more as a show than as a contest".<sup>63</sup> In July 1917, Langley wrote home that the men were "delighted" with the displays and that "it brought officers of different battalions closer together – and men of different companies came to know others as battalion comrades".<sup>64</sup>

These events were held on many occasions throughout 1917 and 1918, and souvenir programs were created to catalogue the days' events. Langley kept a program from the ICCB sports days on 12 and 13 February 1918 which lists the events and competitors, and records the winners in his handwriting.<sup>65</sup> Alongside the names of men competing in the events, the programs also recorded the names of competing camels. Much can be gleaned from these names about an individual soldier's personal affection for their camel. The temperament of Smiler or Starlight was likely vastly different to that of Cyanide. The sports days, while serving as a morale-boost for the soldiers, could also provide monetary reward. Each event had prizes available for successful competitors, ranging from 25 piastres for third place in the hop, step and jump, to 750 piastres for the "Best Turned Out Section".<sup>66</sup> In place of a monetary reward for the "Section Bivouac Competition", the successful No. 10 Company won a barrel of beer.<sup>67</sup> These sports days promoted competition and section cooperation as well as officer engagement. There were many events for officers only and all events were judged by a variety of higher-ranking officers, some by General Clement Leslie Smith.<sup>68</sup> The importance of these sports days cannot be understated in the history of the ICCB and their record in souvenir programs and the brigade newsletters demonstrates the widespread interest and attention these events inspired, despite the successes or failures of the allied campaign at the time.

Having sufficiently licked their wounds and spent the remainder of the year undertaking smaller operations in Egypt, the ICCB was present at, but not involved in, the Battle of Beersheba, which led to the fall of Gaza in early November 1917. It was engaged at Khuweilfe before advancing with the EEF northward to Jerusalem and on toward Jericho.<sup>69</sup> After spending Christmas near Jerusalem, the ICCB returned to action as the EEF set its sights on Amman. The brigade, now attached to the Anzac Mounted Division, was engaged in trans-Jordan operations including attacking the Hejaz Railway and the First Battle of Amman.<sup>70</sup>

The trans-Jordan operations proved to be disastrous for the EEF, and the ICCB suffered sharp losses in March and April 1918 that amounted to some 3,000 casualties.<sup>71</sup> It was during this period that the characteristics of the camel which made it such an important asset in desert fighting began to hinder the cameleers. The rocky and treacherous terrain of the Jordan Valley and southern Palestine proved very difficult for the camels to navigate. According to Hogue, "never will the Cameleers forget that night journey over slippery goat tracks to Es Salt". He

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<sup>62</sup> "Souvenir Program of Imperial Camel Brigade Sports: Somewhere in Palestine 12<sup>th</sup>- 13<sup>th</sup> February 1918," G.F. Langley, AWM PR00096.

<sup>63</sup> "Souvenir Program," AWM PR00096.

<sup>64</sup> G. F. Langley Letter home to family, Palestine, September 19, 1917, 4, AWM PR00096.

<sup>65</sup> "Souvenir Program," AWM PR00096".

<sup>66</sup> "Souvenir Program," AWM PR00096".

<sup>67</sup> "Souvenir Program," AWM PR00096".

<sup>68</sup> "Souvenir Program," AWM PR00096".

<sup>69</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 409, 516.

<sup>70</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 584.

<sup>71</sup> "The Trans-Jordan raids," New Zealand History, November 3, 2017, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/palestine-campaign/trans-jordan-raids>.

described how “camels would collapse, bogged and helpless, and some toppled over the precipice”.<sup>72</sup> When writing of the road to Amman, Reid lamented that “the poor brutes were never meant for this kind of work”.<sup>73</sup> The attributes that made the camels preferable to horses in the Sinai were now actively endangering the men of the brigade. With attempts to reach Amman ending in failure, the EEF retreated and regrouped in Palestine, and it was here that the brigade would make their last stand.

Ottoman forces launched a counterattack in the Jordan Valley on 11 April 1918. The heaviest blow fell on the 1st Battalion, commanded by Langley at Musallabeh as it held the British Line.<sup>74</sup> The hill at Musallabeh was a rocky outcrop that provided minimal cover and no opportunity to dig trenches. When heavy shelling of the battalion’s position began at 4 am, the battalion began to suffer casualties. At 5 am, artillery ceased, and a vastly superior force of Ottoman troops rushed the hill and having had communications with their own artillery cut, the Australian cameleers were isolated.<sup>75</sup> While trying to engage the enemy with their rifles as they were approached up the slope, the men of the 1st Battalion were under heavy and accurate fire from snipers behind the Ottoman line. Three hours of intricate and close-quarters combat ensued, during which the use of grenades became essential to the cameleers. So desperate were they to hold the position for reinforcements, that after they had exhausted their ammunition, they began to heave boulders down the hill onto the enemy.<sup>76</sup> Gullet commented in the Official History that “although sorely pressed, the Camels never lost control of a critical situation”.<sup>77</sup>

At approximately 8 am the enemy withdrew, and the cameleers were reinforced by a company of the 2nd Battalion before the attack began anew in the afternoon. This was again repelled by the cameleers, securing the allied position. By the morning of 12 April, approximately 60 of the 100 men at the garrison the previous day were casualties. The Ottoman dead numbered close to 170.<sup>78</sup> This being the last major engagement in which the ICCB was involved in, the Australian soldiers of the 1st Battalion distinguished themselves in their greatest individual success of their entire campaign. Several decorations were awarded to officers who survived the assault, as well as the rank and file, and when General Allenby visited to commend the men on their performance, he declared that Musallabeh should forever be known as “The Camel’s Hump”.<sup>79</sup> Hogue memorialised this day with his poem, *The Camel’s Hump*, which was published in Australian newspapers. Gullet declared in the Official History that “the Australians had won by the steadiness of their leadership, their perfect fire discipline, and their straight shooting”.<sup>80</sup> He also noted that “this day’s good work, coming after the failure at Amman, greatly cheered all the troops”.<sup>81</sup>

The ICCB was also present at the second unsuccessful trans-Jordan attack on Amman but did not engage in any meaningful fighting. It was not long until the order came from the

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<sup>72</sup> Oliver Hogue (Trooper Bluegum), “The Camel Brigade” in *Australia in Palestine* ed. Henry Gullet, Charles Barrat and David Crothers Barker (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1919): 130.

<sup>73</sup> Hogue, “The Camel Brigade,” 130.

<sup>74</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42.

<sup>75</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 588.

<sup>76</sup> G. F. Langley, *Sand, Sweat & Camels* (Kilmore: Lowden Publishing Co.: 1976): 124.

<sup>77</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 592.

<sup>78</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42; Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 592.

<sup>79</sup> Langley, *Sand, Sweat & Camels*, 124.

<sup>80</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 592.

<sup>81</sup> Gullet, *Vol. VII Sinai & Palestine*, 592.

EEF that the corps was to be disbanded and troops were to be returned to their parent units or formed into Light Horse Regiments for the push north into Syria for Damascus and Aleppo. In June 1918, the Australian and New Zealand Battalions of the Imperial Camel Corps were officially disbanded.<sup>82</sup> The Australian troops formed the 14th and 15th Light Horse Regiments, which became part of the 5th Light Horse Brigade. The Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery were also part of this new brigade and the Camel Field Ambulance gave up its camels for horses and continued its work with fellow ex-cameleers.<sup>83</sup> Only the 2nd British Battalion remained mounted on camels as it was sent back into the desert to assist T.E. Lawrence, more commonly remembered as Lawrence of Arabia, with the Arab Revolt.<sup>84</sup>

In July 1918, the 1st Battalion held a mock funeral to commemorate the life of the Camel Corps. The men wrapped a camel's saddle in the Union Jack and, after holding a full military funeral, buried the saddle outside camp at Richon le Zion.<sup>85</sup> The padre conducting the burial service ended with these words:

I invite you all to look for the last time on this emblem of the departing Camel Corps ... upon this instrument both of comfort and torture ... For as much as it hath pleased the powers that be to take out of this life our beloved Camel Corps we therefore commit its saddle to the ground – earth to earth – ashes to ashes – dust to dust – in sure and certain hope that it will never rise into being again while this war lasts.<sup>86</sup>

There were mixed sentiments among the corps about its death which the padre captured perfectly: both comfort and torture. While many men were excited to be back to their horses, they were keenly aware of the lost luxuries that their camel mounts provided. Private Maurice Ayliffe wrote home on 8 July 1918 to say that “the other day I had my first ride on a horse for about two years and it is a treat after the swaying about on a camel. The only thing is the carrying capacity is limited ... and I miss the blankets I used to have”.<sup>87</sup> Hogue, who had once described the camel as one of the “vilest, stupidest, craziest beasts that ever cumbered the earth”, penned a poem, *Farewell To My Steed*, in August 1918, in which he gave something of an apology to his camel, reflecting the ways the cameleers sentiments had changed over time:

It was then my errant fancy lightly turned to thoughts of verse, And I libelled you, old Hoosta, in a wild iambic curse. I know you now for better; but for you I might be dead. So I recant, old Hoosta, I take back all I said.<sup>88</sup>

The Camel Corps went on fighting in the newly formed 5th Light Horse Brigade but farewelled the desert and their camels in Palestine as they moved northward and toward armistice.

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<sup>82</sup> Langley, *Sand, Sweat & Camels*, 125.

<sup>83</sup> Hall, “A short history,” AWM224 MSS42.

<sup>84</sup> Just as there came to be a myth that all the Allied horses in the Middle East were shot after the war, so did it exist for the camels. Many soldiers expressed displeasure at the thought of leaving their mounts with the local Arabic people due to cultural preconceptions about animal treatment, but there is no evidence that Allied animals were shot en masse. The camels were either utilised as pack camels and sent to join Lawrence's campaign, redistributed to Imperial outposts in the region, or sold to locals as working animals; Langley, *Sand, Sweat & Camels*, 127.

<sup>85</sup> Langley, *Sand, Sweat & Camels*, 145; “Members of the Imperial Camel Corps conducting a mock funeral on the disbandment of their unit,” AWM B00200, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C451263>.

<sup>86</sup> Padre Houston, “Burial Service of the Imperial Camel Corps,” as found in G. F. Langley AWM PR00096.

<sup>87</sup> “Copy of Letter from the late Pte M. Ayliffe. No.2160A. 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Squadron,” Palestine, July 8, 1918, AWM2021.7.51.

<sup>88</sup> Oliver Hogue, “Farewell to my Steed,” in *The Kia Ora Coo-Ee*, August 15, 1918, 12.

After the end of the war the cameleers fought to preserve their legacy and that of the men who had fought and died with them in the Sinai and Palestine. Oliver Hogue's book, *The Cameliers*, was published shortly before he died of malaria in 1919. No further books were published on the ICCB until Frank Reid's 1934 *The Fighting Cameliers*. George Langley's posthumously published book *Sand, Sweat, and Camels: The Australian Companies of the Imperial Camel Corps* was released in 1976. Together, these three books are the most significant pieces of literature that attempt to chronicle the Australian history of the Imperial Camel Corps, all of which were written by ex-cameleers. It is these books that have shaped the narrative surrounding the corps and, in many ways, have encouraged particularly the troublesome perception of the cameleers.

Hogue's book, published just one year after the end of the war, took the stereotypically Anzac tone that historian Graham Seal would describe as courageous and sombre but never without humour.<sup>89</sup> While lauding the military achievements of the corps, Hogue was not afraid to tell of some of the misbehaviour of the cameleers.<sup>90</sup> Reid lent heavily into the pre-established reputation of roughness and relied on anecdotes for the book that emphasised the troublesome nature of some of the troops. This is not to say that he did not take clear pride in the achievements of his unit, but as a writer who published under many pseudonyms including that of Bill Bowyang, he specifically sought out humorous and more mischievous stories for his book. He even wrote to Langley while putting his book together and specifically requested information on, or "any mention of bravery, humorous incidents, and 'hard-doers' in [the] ICC".<sup>91</sup> This request was not received well by Langley who later admitted that he "did not help him one iota in his book" and was much displeased with the way Reid was portraying the ICCB.<sup>92</sup>

As an officer, Langley strongly objected to the notion that the brigade boasted the roughest Australian troops and strongly objected to Reid's depiction of the Camel Corps. He chose to produce a more comprehensive and historical depiction of the Camel Corps, beginning in Sudan and following the corps back into the desert with Lawrence. He firmly rejected Reid's presentation of an Australian cameleer as a "hard-doer", a perspective which was undoubtedly impacted by his status as a captain who would not have had the same experiences as Reid, who served as a private.<sup>93</sup> While these ex-cameleers may disagree on the ways in which they felt the ICCB should be remembered, all three agreed that the brigade need to be appropriately recognised for its achievements and memorialised as such.

The cameleers have not only been commemorated in post-war memoirs. The Imperial Camel Corps has a statue in its honour in the Victoria Gardens in Embankment, London. This forms part of the Desert Mounted Corps Memorial which was erected in 1921 in a ceremony attended by the Australian and New Zealand Prime Ministers.<sup>94</sup> This ceremony was also

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<sup>89</sup> Graham Seal, *Great Anzac Stories: The Men and Women Who Created the Digger Legend* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2012).

<sup>90</sup> Hogue, *The Cameleers*, 8-10.

<sup>91</sup> Letter from Frank Reid to G.F. Langley, Bowen, March 6, 1933, AWM PR00096.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from G.F. Langley, Warrnambool, March 22, 1934, AWM PR00096.

<sup>93</sup> Reid to Langley, 1933, AWM PR00096.

<sup>94</sup> Langley, *Sand, Sweat & Camels*, 146-147.

attended by many ex-cameleers, including officers and other ranks who continued to lay wreaths at this statue on the anniversary of its unveiling for years to come.<sup>95</sup>

Many officers and soldiers in the post-war years record meetings with old Camel Corps members. Reid talks in his book of Lieutenant Colonel De Lancey Forth of the 3rd Battalion visiting Australia in 1925 and meeting many of the men who had served under him in the ICCB. Similarly, Captain Bichan wrote to Langley of a Camel Corps dinner held in Glasgow in 1934.<sup>96</sup> These connections lasted long after the death of the corps. While there is very little surviving documentation, the Imperial Camel Corps Old Comrades Association was distributing “Irregular Newsletters” under the title “Barrak” until at least July 1981.<sup>97</sup> These provided death notices of ex-cameleers, photographs of reunions, and opportunities to reminisce about their war service and their time in the Imperial Camel Corps. As was the case with most units that served in the AIF during the First World War, the act of memorialising their unit was of utmost importance in post-war life. The Camel Corps was no different. What was perhaps most impressive about the Camel Corps was that its Imperial nature meant that its members were dispersed around the Empire. However, this distance did not dampen the desire for connection or reconnection, and remembrance.

There are many parallels to be drawn between the cameleer and his steed. Just as the camel was a cantankerous and at times difficult beast to manage, it proved its worth in the fulfilment of its duty, even if perhaps in a rougher, coarser way than would be expected of a horse. While the stigma of being a rough band of men pulled from the dregs of their former battalions plagued the ICCB throughout its lifetime and remains one of its defining legacies today, the Australian cameleers proved themselves time and again to be brave and dependable soldiers who embraced their reputation and formed a vital component of the AIF’s Middle Eastern campaign.

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<sup>95</sup> Langley, *Sand, Sweat & Camels*, 146-147.

<sup>96</sup> Reid, *The Fighting Cameliers*, 226; Letter from W.T. Bichan to G.F. Langley, April 1, 1935, AWM PR00096.

<sup>97</sup> Laurence Moore, “Barrak,” *Irregular News- Letter of the Old Boys of the Imperial Camel Corps* 41 (July 1981): 1-6, AWM PR00096.

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